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The problem with critique, and critique as a problem

ASAD, TALAL, WENDY BROWN, JUDITH BUTLER, & SABA MAHMOOD. *Is critique secular? Blasphemy, injury and free speech*. xx, 148 pp. bibliogrs. New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2013. £12.99 (paper)

If you are looking for a hard-and-fast answer to the question in this book's title, we are told by the preface to this new edition of *Is critique secular?*, you have the wrong set of expectations. This discussion of the charges of 'blasphemy' precipitated by the 2005 Danish *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoon controversy is meant to unsettle rather than to work towards resolution and closure. As the preface presents it, the aim of the book is to dislodge visions of critique as a peculiar possession of a secular West (as opposed to the other stabilizing agent in this disjunctive binary, 'Islam'), to question the conditions of possibility for critique being privileged as an essential part of the liberal state, and to challenge a secure trust in normative accounts of a religiously neutral European secularism. And these things the volume does rather well. However, the very reasoning it uses to make the case ironically forecloses any possibility of thinking through an alternative, or of giving an account of the exceptions to the rule that the authors themselves rely upon to make this reasoning visible.

This book is a new edition, with the only change, other than pagination, being the addition of a preface credited to Wendy Brown (the editor), Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (the third contributor, Talal Asad, is not credited, but his views are given space in the preface's exposition). This preface is a slight addition, along the lines of another rehearsal of the book's arguments (albeit it a particularly succinct one)

rather than a re-imagination, an expansion, or a rebuttal. Given this, it might be questioned whether it was necessary to offer a new edition of a book that was, after all, originally issued only in 2009; this question might seem especially warranted when one takes into consideration the fact that the book's two core essays, authored separately by Asad and Mahmood, had already seen publication in other venues as well (Asad 2007; Mahmood 2009).

However, an argument for a new edition could be grounded in the fact that there is something about the wider reception of the book's claims which seems to have touched a nerve. As Mahmood says near the end of the volume, in prior presentations of her essay as a spoken paper, 'most of my academic audiences have had a hard time putting aside their judgment that Muslims acted irrationally and their fear that this kind of religiosity, if allowed into the public sphere, would destroy the secular accomplishments of citizens ... and of their participation in civic and political life' (pp. 146); those who suspect this may be hyperbole on her part might be able to allay this concern by following the long-running series of somewhat heated exchanges between Mahmood and Stathis Gourgouris (2008a; 2008b; 2008c). For these reasons alone, it would seem, a new volume is understandable; but at the same time, in this new edition, as well as in the negative response that warranted it, and which will most likely follow in its wake, we have evidence of (to borrow Freudian terminology) a repetition without a working through.

The framing used above, or a 'response' to the book as a whole, should not be taken to mean that there is a complete harmony of minds between all of the contributors. While the desire to open up rather than to fix does not preclude a great deal of resonance between the positions of the two chief essayists, Talal Asad

and Saba Mahmood, there are subtle differences in their respective reactions to what were understood as Muslim accusations of blasphemy. However, as Asad notes, what 'Islam' was complaining about was not so much *blasphemy* as it was *seduction*: the assumption behind the perceived wrong being that these cartoons were intended to lure people away from their already-extant public commitment to Islam, and thereby erode the social fabric. Mahmood's framing of the nature of the wrong is slightly different: she sees the reaction to the cartoon as the result of an Islamic 'semiotic ideology' (a term Mahmood borrows from Webb Keane [2007]). Here, the caricatures of Muhammad are seen as injurious not because Muslims have an insufficient, if not stillborn, sense of tolerance, nor because they cannot fathom the difference between a representation and its object, but rather because these images interfere with an economy of religious ethics and affects where Muhammad functions as the central exemplar in a regimen of embodied internalizations, habituations, and identifications used to form the virtuous person. This makes insults to the Prophet uniquely personal, violations of something so intimate that they are effectively an aspect of the self, even while at the insult also serves as an impeachment of the good.

These discussions open up a wider re-evaluation of the 'West' and 'Islam'. For instance, Asad notes by way of a discussion of copyright and pornography that free speech in the West is not always so free. Nor is Islam as restrictive as often characterized: a certain epistemological scepticism about subjective mental states is attributed to Islamic jurisprudence, as is a corresponding freedom of individual conscience (though not of speech). The neutrality of the secular is given a working-over as well: revisiting elements of his argument in *Genealogies of religion* (Asad 1993), the apogee of secularism, the separation of church and state, is presented as presuming and enforcing a cognitive and voluntaristic understanding of religion

that is not universal in its scope, but is rather particular to a certain Protestant tradition. This argument is for the most part that presumptions about what is religion follows a *formal* structure of Protestantism, rather than a substantive investment in the religion. Asad, however, is also quick to note instances of contemporary Western governmental acknowledgement of Christian or Jewish religious sensitivities, sensitivities that, he states, were not extended to Muslims in the *Jyllands-Posten* case.

Even the identification of critique with Western Enlightenment is destabilized. While Asad states that the genealogy of critique ‘has yet to mapped’ (p. 27), his own review of the transformations of the concept leads him to the judgement that, in the West at least, the answer to the question ‘what is critique?’ was, for most of history, ‘the evaluation and interpretation of the truth of scripture’ (pp. 42-3). Further, contemporary forms of secular critique are presented as a form of unmasking violence. Critique, then, is nothing more than a ‘family concept for which it is not possible to prove a single theory because the practices that constitute them differ’ (p. 49). Hence it is an error to understand critique as a stable entity, solely and exclusively possessed by a heroic secular West. And even more to the point, to see unfettered critique as a necessity for the existence of a secular West might be a mistake as well. Since it was this obligation to unfettered critique which was the argument of those who defended the various publications of the cartoons of Muhammad, this raises the spectre that they were in part animated by some other force – perhaps an animus against Muslims that is not entirely a function of concerns about the welfare and well-being of secular liberalism.

It is not clear, though, whether this exchange bears any political fruit. Asad denies any normative project, though he does end by speculating on what would happen

if the West was not only to take the religious language of blasphemy seriously, but also to extend blasphemy to include the loss of life that the West causes, by action and omission, in the Global South. In contrast, Mahmood closes by simply warning Muslims against attempts to seek recourse through the law in cases like these.

While it is not unimaginable that the contemporary legal regime could be mobilized in the defence of Muslims who felt injured by the cartoon, such a victory would be a pyrrhic one, since it would just endorse a legal system that is predicated on liberal secular assumptions as to what constitutes proper religion – assumptions that would in the end be corrosive of the particular Islamic affective and ethical economy of identification that Mahmood sees as central to much of theologically conservative Muslim practice (see also Sullivan 2005). Rather, Mahmood insists that what is needed is an effort to ‘allow thinking to proceed in unaccustomed ways’, though she is not sanguine about the possibility of that actually occurring (p. 86).

It is the uncertain political stakes implicit in Mahmood’s and Asad’s arguments which garner the lion’s share of attention in the response by Judith Butler (and in the following replies by Mahmood and Asad). On the one hand, Butler claims to see the ligaments of a normative project implicit in Asad’s work; on the other, she openly worries about what she sees as Mahmood’s apparent retreat from the political. The rest of the response consists of a thoughtful meditation by Butler on the challenges raised for LGBT communities by allowances of and restrictions on free speech. The problem arises from the fact that a purported Islamic antipathy to various non-heterosexual subjects and acts is used as a warrant by some in Denmark in their attempt to exclude Muslims from the public sphere. Most notably, Butler suggests that there may be elements of critique – such as Foucault’s (1984) reading of critique as ‘a way out’ – which might be detached from an

unmasking project of crypto-Protestant secular enlightenment, and therefore still be of use.

I will not comment on these political aspects of the discussion. In good liberal fashion, let's leave determinations on this front to the individual consciences of those who choose to read the volume. Rather, I would like to raise some different questions. Taken in totality, these do not point to a weakness in the arguments, but rather to a certain blindness to movements and potentials that may speak both to Mahmood's proposed solution as well as to her lack of hope. The first of these questions is whether illiberal forms of Western Christianity feel particularly privileged by the current secular liberal regime. This is an issue that the book's laser-like focus on Islam forecloses, so it is hard to intuit what Mahmood and Asad would say to this question. It is certainly true that in this book Christianity in general, and Protestantism in particular, is schematized to such an extent that it becomes a relatively flat abstraction, rarefied to a threshold where any possible instantiation of it seems to dissolve. (At some points we even have Asad talk about Catholicism as if it were a single juridical position, rather than a welter of differing practices, institutions, rites, and populations.) This flattening of Christianity and Protestantism is so extreme that at times it seems that the authors see all of Protestantism as having one particular yet generalizable relation to the entirety of the secular. This would be a phantasmic relationship where Protestantism acts not just as a genealogical precursor to the present liberal configurations of sensibilities, or as a product of a contemporary secular mode of governance, but as a still potent privileged *genius* for the secular as well. However, as has been noted by the anthropologist Brian Howell in his otherwise rather positive embrace of this book, the conception of Protestantism in the volume seems to be a poor fit with the state of theologically conservative American and European public Christianity in the present moment; this is especially true following the *Holly Lobby* case in the

United States Supreme Court, where closely held privately corporations were granted the right to claim a religious exemption to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act obligation to cover contraceptives in employer-subsidised insurance schemes. The general levels of secularised public hostility expressed towards Hobby-Lobby's claim, as well as towards the Court decision in the corporation's favour, shows an antipathy among many secularists to any attempt to 'represent religion as anything other than private, interiorized elements of affect and belief' (Howell 2014). At the same time, though, it was a form of Protestantism itself which militated for an exception to the affordable care act, suggesting that it, too, is ill described by the Protestant semiotic ideology that is supposedly regnant in the West. Now, it is not the special consideration to illiberal Protestant concerns which seems to go against the grain of Asad's and Mahmood's arguments. Asad several times suggests that there was a certain hypocrisy in the way that the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons were treated when compared to material produced by the Western media that was seen as injurious to Christian or Jewish sensibilities. But the live tensions between these theologically conservative forms of Protestantism and (at least temporally) the executive organs of the state suggest that the co-constitutive relations between secularism and Western religion may not be as cozy as Mahmood and Asad suggest; this points to other directions, other potentialities, straining under the surface.

This brings us to another issue which, at first blush, may appear to be unrelated: why is it that *anthropology* is such a dangerous term here? Both authors respond to Butler's use of that word as an insult, and Mahmood does not see her use of the word *culture* (or, as it sometimes appears, '*culturalist*') as a compliment either. This could perhaps be thought of as a reaction to the spectre of an Islamic alterity, but this cannot be the case, as the very logic of both Asad's and Mahmood's arguments

turns on there being a constellation of affects, ethics, and semiotics that is different from and unintelligible to the self-possessed West. Rather, the injury appears to be a function of a wider inability on the part of both Mahmood and Butler to think of culture as demarcating anything other than a homogeneous, self-effectuating collectivity. As Mahmood says while vigorously disowning the term 'Islamic culture', she suspects 'that there are as many Muslims who would disagree with the model of relationship ... that I outline in this essay as there are those who would concur with it' (p 141). This conflation of culture with a discrete, bounded, homogeneous, and apolitical essentialism is of course nothing new (see Brightman 1995). But there is some small irony in that, despite quite careful couching and qualifications by Asad and Mahmood, both 'Islam' and 'secularism' are spoken about as if they were discrete, bounded, and homogeneous entities. Asad, and particularly Mahmood, are undoubtedly describing a certain strain of Muslim religiosity; but once that strain is demarcated in their writing there is no variation, mutation, or differences of intensity within the depiction of that form of religiosity that would allow for differentially distinct modes of expression of what is formally the same structure or category (cf. Bangstad 2009; Khan 2012). Despite this foreclosure of internal difference, the discussion consists of moments where these broad typologies of Muslim, Christian and Secular are made visible by contrasting them with distinct non-conforming cases. However, these other instances that are used to make the typological claims apparent are themselves dependent on internal differentiations within these typologies that seem to place the homogeneity of these typologies into question. In short, issues of blasphemy and seduction both in the West and in Islam are made readable by 'violations' such as the Abu Zayd blasphemy case in Egypt, or Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* in the United States, but the status, imaginaries, and politics of these exceptions are not engaged with in the least. Ultimately, what is not addressed is the fact that these violations themselves

point to other ways of being that are internal to whatever it is that 'the West' and 'Islam' are supposed to stand for. Of course, there are good reasons, grounded in both coherence of argument and the necessities of length, why authors might take this tack, and appropriate apologies for rhetorical essentializations *are* duly made. Further, for all the centrifugal movement that promotes differentiation within any one of these particular spheres, there are also undoubtably centripetal forces as well (and indeed, in earlier works, Asad himself has been one of the most adept thinkers when it comes to identifying what those centripetal forces are, and how they function). However, it seems that any argument that is pushing to reconceive critique as 'family' resemblance (p.49), that is searching for mechanisms that would facilitate 'thinking to proceed in unaccustomed ways' (p.86), would have to keep an eye open for variation and potential at all scales.

This does not undo this book's claims, but it does raise the possibility that the genealogical and ethical analytics relied upon have a shared blind spot, and that there is a need to discover mechanisms that allow for thinking identity and difference simultaneously, rather than in alternating succession, if the intellectual projects that these authors work towards are to be fully achieved. The key may lie in the already noted oddness associated both with this book and with its prehistory: the seeming repetition-compulsion animating the continual republications and debates of this material. The work of this book is to unsettle, to draw back to an underlying question and hence complicate; but the continual clashes over the book suggest that perhaps this question, as well as other attendant questions about moral injury, freedom of action, and the limits of the person, are already located close to the surface. What may be called for is an approach that focuses not solely on the concept of genealogies or semiotic ideologies, but also on the underlying, generative, and long-enduring *problems* that may subsist beneath both of these

configurations. Here these problems, as they are engaged with, would have a potentiality to be actualized in numerous different manners, depending not only on the more established determining aspects of a particular milieu, but also on the stochastic forces that cut across these hegemonic fields. If we assume that (at least when well posed) the problems of the anthropologist are the problems of the anthropologist's interlocutors in the field as well, then we can see that the same indeterminable and inexhaustible problems that have been an engine for academic debate and creativity may be an engine for debate and creativity with our interlocutors too.

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